

It's Hard to Know When You Find It If you Don't Know What You're Searching For
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Hunting Nettles

Quite a number of years ago, I lived for a few days in a Danish Iron Age village as part of a teaching experience in Denmark. Think of Old Sturbridge Village, but much older. And think of not only spending the day, but also the night. I quickly discovered that people in the Danish Iron Age spent a good chunk of their day looking for food. I spent much of each day searching for nettles, which would be stewed up into a chewable vegetable for consumption at the evening meal. There was some pressure involved in searching for these nettles, however. The “professional” Iron Age Dane guiding me pointed out that a plant that looked very much like a nettle plant also grew in the area, but was poisonous to humans. I had to search very carefully. Forty-odd years after this experience, searching for those nettles remains high on the list of what I remember from my visit to the Danish Iron Age – how much of the day it took; the uncertainty I initially felt at my ability to discern between the edible and the poisonous nettles. It was Hard to Know When I Found Real Nettles Because I Didn't Really Know What I Was Searching For.

Challenge of Seeking a Spiritual Home

How I felt in that situation seems to have parallels with how many people today feel when trying to take care of their spiritual needs. Many people find it hard to know when they've found what they need, because they aren't quite sure what they are searching for. It used to be more common for people to have some idea of what they wanted when they went searching for spiritual nourishment. Not long ago people generally had been raised in a church or with some awareness of institutionalized spirituality, so they had some idea of what was on offer. “Church” is not so widely known today. And – in part because of the failure of churches ranging through all sorts of calamities including abuse and rejection – it's more likely that if people know anything about church they know what they DON'T want. And that situation makes it much easier to be distracted from pursuing

spiritual choices. A wide range of activities become possible candidates for filling a spiritual void.

Hiking or running or boating or skating will usually make a person feel better. Working 24/7 can result in accomplishments that fuel a sense of personal satisfaction. Sleeping in does restore depleted energy and prepare a person for true “quality time” with the family. Music and poetry can create a feeling of the sublime. The list continues and it can get in to areas where we may be more influenced – manipulated, really – by forces not the least bit good for our spiritual health. We can shop for that perfect outfit, accessory, tool, or car hoping that it will give us the fuller sense of self we may crave. We can self-identify as part of that athletic team, taking credit for all accomplished as if we have trained and traveled and played with them. We can take that dream vacation or binge watch that television series. We can take that drink or that drug that promises to ease the unease we don’t understand and cannot abide. We have so many options to provide us with gratification, distraction - satisfaction that the “spiritual need” seems okay if secularized.

Power of the Drive for Meaning

But rarely are these distractions enough to truly satisfy that drive for meaning, for belonging to something greater, for penetration of the mysteries that human beings seem to crave. British writer C.S. Lewis defined that drive as a “ ‘joy’ or deep longing of the human heart this world cannot satisfy.” (*C.S. Lewis Journey of Faith* by Robert B. Stewart) Bertrand Russell, an atheist, spoke of the “searching for something beyond what the world contains – something transfigured and infinite. (Bertrand Russell, 1916, Letter to Constance Malleson, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*) Father of American Psychology, William James, wrote that “There are two lives, the natural and the spiritual...” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*) And the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing lists seven spiritual needs of the human being – many of them sounding very similar to the UUA Principles – based on Methodist minister Howard Clinebell’s three decades of psychological and pastoral care at the Claremont School of Theology in California. They include “the need for love from an ultimate source ...renewing times of transcendence Vital beliefs that give some sense of

meaning and hope in the midst of losses, tragedies, and failures ...”

(<http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/create-healthy-lifestyle/life-purpose-and-spirituality/what-life-purpose/seven-spiritual-needs>)

Humans have a spiritual need that must be met, but it is a need that can be muffled by all the options, all the activity, all the expectations, all the voices of our modern lives.

Searching can only grow more difficult the further away people get from the awareness of the good that even our flawed churches have done. I say “flawed churches” because, although they deal with the divine, they are human institutions.

What Can Help

Now obviously, I approach this situation with the idea of a church foremost in my mind. I’m a minister. Still, let me offer a slight disclaimer, though, and say that church may not be the answer for every single person’s spiritual need. But I will also say that such a person - to live meaningfully - is either gifted beyond most others or willing to work incredibly hard.

So how do the rest of us take care of our spiritual need?

Survival in my Danish Iron Age village provides some possibilities, even though it was about physical survival. I needed a **guide** there to survive. My own understanding and experience wasn’t enough. I needed someone who (a) knew that nettles were nourishing, (b) knew where they might grow and what they looked like, and (c) knew what looked LIKE nettles that would be dangerous. I also needed **time** to gather the nettles. They weren’t just wrapped up on a shelf for me to pick up. My day was devoted to finding them. And I needed **motivation** to keep searching for the nettles. That was easy. I wanted to eat. I didn’t want to poison my friends. I had a responsibility to myself, and to my community.

In finding nourishment for our spiritual needs, similar factors can help tremendously. The structure of church provides a **guide**. Church is a place where ritual is honored. Ritual IS a guide. Whoever leads the service knows the ritual. Many in attendance know when they are supposed to do what and, one hopes, what it means. Often there's a practice in place that can be followed in a program, experienced and explored by everyone. There's a sense of history and future that provides directions for deeper exploration. And it all unfolds within a definite pattern.

Pattern. That's a key thing church offers in terms of guidance. When, as Tara Conklin says in our reading, someone is given the gift of direction it IS a gift. But it isn't necessarily appreciated fully the first time. Or the second. Or even the third. One of the benefits of the guidance that church provides is that it offers a pattern, the repetition enabling the seeker to discover how it wears over time, how it fits them through different seasons, if the pattern frees them or restricts them. The pattern can move beyond the church service, reaching to where the church community supplements the guidance of ritual.

What better way to gain insight about spiritual need than to discuss it in words and actions with a caring community? How fine to explore with others interested in similar questions, and not necessarily identical answers. How helpful to be guided by their discoveries and doubts. We are at heart social creatures, not meant to live in isolation. The richness of shared experience and conversation, the opportunity to learn from what others have encountered offer invaluable guidance. Whether we learn in words or in actions and interactions, we have opportunities to "try out" what we are learning and test what we already believe.

Of course, all of this takes **time** and, yes, time is essential for nourishing spiritual needs. To experience the pattern, the people, the potential, takes time. Our Centering Thought asks "... in all that searching you don't find the time for finding?" One of our hymns says "find a stillness, hold a stillness." That requires a pause. There's no drive-in window for the spiritual need quest. No Get Personal Spirituality – G.P.S. - device

where one can plug in what they think they want and get sure directions. We don't know what we want until we go through a real process of reflection. Searching with others, benefiting from their experience, requires the time of listening with an open heart to our guides who are sharing our journey. Experiencing the pattern of ritual over seasons takes time – leaving and returning; finding one's own way of interacting with the pattern takes time. Meeting spiritual need requires time to search, to share, to nourish, to consider. Doing all these things of course strengthens **motivation**. Time has been invested. Other people are now involved. The community that provided guidance with the pattern is owed. The community has helped build relationship, and with relationship comes responsibility.

Closing

So. I'm preaching to the choir today. You all have found Second Parish and recognized it as a home of sorts, hopefully a place where your widely varied spiritual needs find welcome. Many of you have been "home" here long enough not to fear the problem of being unable to recognize what you've found because you don't know what you're looking for.

But maybe in the days to come all of you will think about how you came here; who were your guides; how you experienced and now experience the pattern that has become so familiar to you; how time has been a factor in your home here; how you experienced and now experience the community; how you felt and feel the motivation. What a wonderful gift of direction you are in a position to share.

The congregation of Second Parish has a reputation for its embracing warmth of visitors and newcomers. That reputation is well-deserved. But the congregation of Second Parish also has a wealth of experience with meeting spiritual need over the long haul. We but need to talk about it.